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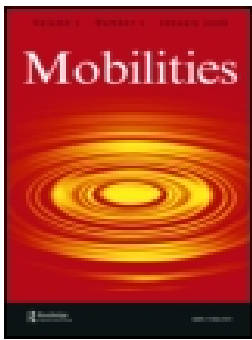
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To move or not to move: mobility decision-making in the context of welfare conditionality and paid employment

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ABSTRACT

The mobility and agency of the unemployed have rarely been examined together in welfare administration. Mobility research has much to offer the (im)mobility of low-skilled and unemployed workers. The article begins by critically examining dominant public discourse and policy reforms that stigmatise the assumed immobility of the unemployed. Drawing on empirical data from in-depth interviews with people on income support payments in Australia, it then offers a critical view on the mobility decision-making processes of these job-seekers. Building on previous research concerning the politics of mobility, it shows that structural inequalities impact mobility choices, making relocation difficult for many job-seekers. At the same time, it highlights the localised mobility that job search now involves, complicating orthodox associations between mobility and power – as well as assumptions that job-seekers are immobile.

KEYWORDS

Mobility; immobility; unemployment; Australia; income support; welfare conditionality

Introduction

Jim is a 21-year-old who has been unemployed for two years. Between doing unpaid work at a local Salvation Army store and sending out 20 to 25 job applications every month, Jim enjoys fishing – ‘we go down there and fill a couple of hours, get a boat, throw out.’ ‘We never catch things,’ he adds, ‘it’s like looking for work, you just miss out by about this much’. Fishing captures the ambivalent state of unemployment and im/mobility that many young Australians experience. To catch a fish, one has to get on a boat, move up or downstream, try a few different spots, ‘throw a lot in the deep’ in Jim’s words, and hope that a fish will take the bait. Waiting is part of the fishing game, and in waiting one becomes immobile, and in Jim’s words, ‘sitting there watching the line. It’s just like [looking for] work’. Jim’s humble analogy highlights the uncertainties of job search and the frustration of not catching anything. The longer the line is in the water with no action or reaction, the higher the chances that anticipation and hope will evaporate.

Current political and policy discussions on enhancing labour flexibility and reducing welfare dependency among individuals of workforce age rarely acknowledge the human costs of such projects. Since the 1990s, a range of ‘work first’ approaches has been adopted by the Australian government to promote labour market participation, curtail income support expenditures and ‘activate’ Australian citizens to become ‘work capable’ (Caswell, Marston, and Larsen 2010). Job-seekers are subsequently expected to meet a range of conditions before they are eligible to access

income support and other welfare benefits. Newstart and Youth Allowance are specific Australian federal government programmes that allow unemployed people to receive regular (but often inadequate) payments until they find paid work. To be eligible, unemployed individuals need to meet activity requirements and develop a job plan as part of an employment pathway initiative that ‘underpins the provision of services to a job seeker’ (Australian Government 2015).

In recent decades, as Australia has moved towards a marketised employment policy, national leaders and policymakers have regarded ‘activation’ as a key strategy to mobilise the unemployed. The aim has been to enable their job-seeking capacity in the labour market and to reduce their perceived ‘welfare dependency’ (Carney 2007; Davidson and Whiteford 2012). Several critiques have emerged, criticising the dominant policy framework underpinning unemployment activation strategies, and arguing that such measures reflect ‘the unreality of the neoclassical labour market’ (Morris and Wilson 2014, 217). Many critics have pointed out that activation policies are based on the assumption that job seeking is only a temporary activity, and that individuals can return to paid employment fairly quickly if they are ‘active’ enough (Davidson and Whiteford 2012; Shaver and Thompson 2001; Humpage 2007; Larsen 2005). Activation-oriented policies tend to focus on changing the behaviours of welfare recipients and shifting the responsibility of finding paid work to individuals (Humpage 2007; Warburton and Smith 2003). Such policies arguably reduce the state’s responsibility to provide stable, high-quality employment (Eardley, Saunders, and Evans 2000). These policies can be seen as examples of ‘responsibilisation’ (Foucault in Lemke 2001), in that they absolve national governments of moral responsibility for people’s welfare, as individual citizens are subjected to sophisticated forms of surveillance and control (Lemke 2001, 201).

An individual’s willingness to move for work has become an implicit indicator of their activity and welfare deservedness. The idea that spatial mobility is now a key requirement of activation regimes has been underlined by Ludwig-Mayerhofer and Behrend (2015) in Germany but has been largely overlooked in other national administrations. When the receipt of income support and unemployment benefits is linked to a particular performance of ‘job readiness’, however, individuals have little choice but to take part in ‘active society’ and get moving. Spatial mobility has become what Dean (1995) calls a ‘governmental-ethical’ apparatus for governing the unemployed. Being seen to be active, through multiple contacts and moves between welfare agencies and employment services, has become a virtue in itself, irrespective of whether it leads to a tangible outcome in regard to employment.

This paper argues that in the Australian context, job-seekers’ spatial mobility has become an intrinsic aspect in ‘work first’ policy strategies and increased welfare conditionality. Individuals are expected to demonstrate they are actively looking for employment and are willing to accept any job on offer, regardless of its location, duration and potential career prospects, and of the individual’s family and community connections. When an individual is receiving unemployment benefits, moving for a job (indeed, any job) is portrayed as not only ‘reasonable’, but also morally necessary. A job-seeker’s mobility is taken as evidence of their motivation and self-activation (Béraud and Eydoux 2011; van Baar 2012); moving or willingness to move is equated with labour adaptability and flexibility, which are desirable qualities in a neo-liberal labour market (Green and Turok 2000; Jensen 2013). Equally, reluctance or failure to move is interpreted as a sign of noncompliance. Labels such as ‘job snobs’ or ‘dole bludgers’ malign such individuals as ‘lazy’ and ‘unwilling to break their welfare dependence’ (e.g. Carswell and Michael 2015). In this way, mobility has come to denote welfare deservedness, while immobility has been taken as evidence of personal failure. In this article, we highlight these constructions and address what Cresswell and colleagues call ‘the relative absence of attention to work in the core mobilities scholarship’, particularly surrounding non-elite workers (Cresswell, Dorow, and Roseman 2016, 1790).

This article is structured in six parts. Following the introduction, we provide an outline of the pejorative policies and discourses that characterise welfare conditionality in Australia. We then introduce the mobility paradigm and offer a critical view on mobility and welfare conditionality in

the context of Australia's welfare reforms in recent decades. In presenting these overviews, we argue that mobility of the unemployed is woven into everyday practices under the regime of welfare conditionality, in which policymakers, the media and politicians ignore the larger structural barriers to securing employment and blame individuals for lacking motivation and the willingness to move for a paid job.

Following these discussions of the relevant literatures and socio-political contexts, we provide an overview of the research project that informs this article and present our empirical findings. Contrary to popular portrayals, we demonstrate that unemployed individuals are not necessarily immobile, immoral or opposed to the idea of geographical relocation. Rather, we show that structural barriers such as a lack of affordable housing in cities with a larger job market, a lack of efficient and affordable public transportation, and a lack of relocation support for individuals who are willing to move are seriously hampering job-seekers' mobility. In addition to this, however, we highlight the disciplinary effects of job search related mobility. We demonstrate that job-seekers are far from immobile and that stringent reporting requirements enforce their movement at the level of daily life. The article concludes by highlighting implications for these findings for theory and practice.

The Australian context: activating 'job snobs'

Since the late 1990s, successive Australian governments have redefined the goals of social security to be all about labour force participation, rather than poverty alleviation. Political slogans like the 'best form of welfare is paid work' (Turnbull 2016) have settled into a mantra, changing the ways in which people understand welfare and employment and obscuring the fact that drastic changes have taken place in the Australia labour market in recent decades. In this process, job search has become a form of work in its own right. Since at least the late 1970s, unemployment has not been a temporary phenomenon for a substantial proportion of the Australian population, with some groups at more risk than others (Bell and Quiggin 2015). Instead of addressing larger structural issues that help to generate new jobs and good jobs, the Australian government has introduced increasingly punitive policies to discipline those on benefits. People on welfare are now considered faulty citizens in need of constant surveillance and prodding. Financial punishment, in the form of the withdrawal of unemployment benefits, is widely used to discipline workfare subjects. Mestan (2014) cites one former policy advisor of the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations who said that all income support recipients need rules because 'they are good for you', and that sanctions are justified to compel individuals do what is supposedly good for them. Raffass (2014) therefore calls what is happening in Australia and other liberal welfare states 'punitive activation'.

The operational arm of mutual obligation in Australia adopts the marketised employment services model. It is caught in a system financially incentivised for short-term employment gains, with diminishing resources to address non-vocational barriers to employment. The front-line workforce that comprises these employment services has found its job satisfaction weakened and its working conditions eroded by high case-loads (Considine et al. 2015). The end result has been a human service enterprise that has lost its most experienced and skilled workers, at precisely the time that the front-line of welfare to work has become more complex and demanding, as more groups are carolled and cajoled into meeting participation requirements that should lead somewhere, but frequently lead nowhere (Considine et al. 2015). The lock-in effects of the programme logic have become opaque, and policymakers appear to find it hard to imagine other possibilities. Certainly, there are cracks and fissures in the workfare policy edifice and some refusals by non-profits have led to governments not being able to proceed with even more punitive measures (Wright, Marston, and McDonald 2011). However, these temporary victories have never been enough to seriously disrupt the policy logic.

Motivation and mobility have been central themes in the political rhetoric that has accompanied and justified these changes. The hardening of public discourse surrounding the unemployed and their perceived lack of mobility is clearly reflected in the debate on 'job snobs' – a term coined by the former Employment Services Minister Tony Abbott in 1999. Abbott made several public appearances in which he described the unemployed as 'job snobs' (Green Left Weekly 1999; Peatling 2016). In coining this phrase, Abbott alleged that unemployed people were 'too fussy' about the kinds of jobs that they would work in and how far they would travel to find employment (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1999).

Abbott's labelling of the unemployed as job snobs is illustrative of his broader perspective on poverty as being determined by individual character and attributes, rather than structural causes (Mendes 2002). Following his comments in 1999, Abbott published an article outlining the rationale for the Howard Government's Job Active network, arguing that an individual's sense of dignity is linked to their employment status, and in particular, an individual's sense of well-being is contingent on the ability to find paid work (Abbott 2001). Yet Abbott did not acknowledge the negative impact that this victim-blaming discourse could have on the well-being of unemployed individuals.

This term 'job snob' has had a lasting effect on the Australian public discourse (e.g. Maiden 2014). The label continues to describe unemployed people as either unwilling to work or as too fussy about the type of work that they would do, referencing a shortage of unskilled workers like tradesmen and fruit pickers. Negative portrayals of unemployed individuals include describing them as lacking 'preparedness' to accept job offers (Savva 2017), 'gaming the [welfare] system' (Martin 2017), and claiming the Disability Support Pension for illegitimate conditions (Peatling 2016). There is also a specific targeting of young people and their 'fussiness'. 'Job snob' labelling and the notion that unemployed people should move to find work have thus permeated the public discourse for two decades in Australia. These tropes are illustrative of the discourse of deservedness for welfare, and how the 'undeserving poor' – especially those who are supposedly fit to work and not sick, elderly or disabled – are deemed morally deficient and unworthy of welfare (Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky 2017).

Mobilities and welfare conditionality

In the popular imagination, modernity and mobility are inherently linked. As Cresswell explains, even 'the word modern seems to evoke images of technological mobility – the car, the plane, the spaceship. It also signifies a world of movement on a global scale' (Cresswell 2006, 15). Employment-related mobility has come to be associated with freedom and cosmopolitan ideals (e.g. Sager 2006; Nowicka 2006; Skeggs 2004). 'Global professionals' are thought to enjoy unencumbered access to pace-setting activities, global connections, transnational social capital, and flexible citizenship (Cresswell, Dorow, and Roseman 2016). While 'the ideological associations of mobility with liberty, freedom and universalism [...] contain serious shortcomings' (Adey 2010: 87), the costs and consequences of mobility are frequently obscured.

This idealisation of mobility brings moral connotations to the politics of movement (Cresswell 2010; Jensen 2009; Doughty and Murray 2014). As Holdsworth (2013) notes, 'if the benefits of individual mobility and freedom are emphasised, then this will have implications for more collective experiences' (2–3), and for those who feel bound by geographic constraints. While the mobile elite are celebrated, those who remain immobile – or, rather, engage in only 'mundane' forms of movement on a local scale (Hislop 2016, 221) – are portrayed as comparatively less sophisticated, as deficient in 'gumption' and initiative, or as the hapless victims of unfortunate circumstances (e.g. Wacquant 1993; Drotbohm 2012).

As a growing body of mobilities scholarship explains, however, mobility is a resource to which not everybody has equal access (Sheller 2013; Merriman 2015; Cresswell 2010; Hyndman 2012; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). Access to mobility is often classed, increasing with position on the

‘social ladder’ (Kaufmann 2014). Even localised movements – such as those made by young people when they leave the family home – are significantly influenced by structural factors such as the quality and availability of social, financial and material support, both within and beyond the family unit (Holdsworth 2004). Those with less resources or less social capital may find themselves unable to adopt socially endorsed identities as mobile and adaptable workers. Yet an emerging body of literature has also begun to note a contrasting but related phenomena: disadvantaged individuals regularly have mobility forced upon them.

Little research has been done into the mobilities of non-elite workers (Cresswell, Dorow, and Roseman 2016, 1790), but the scholarship that does exist paints a bleak picture of contemporary labour markets. As Leach and Yates (2015) explain,

The radical restructuring of contemporary labor markets, combined with the weakening of welfare states, has extended and deepened the commodification of labor and the experience of risk and insecurity at work. In the face of increasingly uncertain hours of work, or confronted with layoff or unemployment, people become more mobile. (39)

From this perspective, employment-related mobility has become a strategy for mitigating against the economic risks associated with some class, race and gender statuses. While the richest among us are frequently the most mobile, so too are those with the fewest resources: ‘economic imperatives and risk avoidance are major forces driving people to consider moving from one place to another’ (Leach and Yates 2015, 40). As Roseman, Barber, and Neis (2015) argue, however, this does not mean that mobility is simply the product of rational individuals seeking to maximise their income. The neo-classical notion that people will relocate if ‘migration costs do not exceed the expected gains’ (Huinink, Vidal, and Kley 2014) does not tell the full story. As Cresswell (2010) notes, inequalities exist in the drivers and consequences of mobility, making it important to ask

why does a person or thing move? An object has to have a force applied to it before it can move. With humans this force is complicated by the fact that it can be internal as well as external. A major distinction in such motive force is thus between being compelled to move or choosing to move. (Cresswell 2010, 22)

This emphasis on what Cresswell (2010) terms the ‘politics of mobility’ is further evident in recent work on state promoted mobility in national and international employment markets (Roseman, Barber, and Neis 2015; Leach and Yates 2015). Oliver (2012) observes that, in the European context, mobile and flexible STEM workers are celebrated as model citizens despite the inherent lack of job security associated with this work; this framing serves the European Union’s strategic objectives of fostering a knowledge-based economy, even as the industry withholds stability from those employed in these roles. Kesselring (2015) similarly argues that economic activity is founded on mobility and that the profiles of companies and the security of job markets depend on mobile workers. Encouraging mobility thus becomes a political strategy to maintain economic stability (Lelièvre and Marshall 2015). Governments and business benefit when large pools of enthusiastic, mobile and ultimately dispensable workers are available.

These strategies are frequently pursued at the expense of individual workers, for whom the realities of a mobile existence are often different from what popular portrayals suggest (Schneider and Limmer 2008). First, at a purely economic level, it is unclear whether relocating improves employment outcomes. Survey research from Germany (Fackler and Rippe 2017) suggests that unemployed people who relocate after job loss may experience poorer labour market outcomes than those who do not. Second, relocating has social and emotional costs for those forced to move. As Favell observes, ‘there are human limits to flexibility, movement, and transience [...] Ultra-mobility is not a stable long-term option for real people’ (Favell 2008, 113). As individuals respond to precarious work conditions by adopting highly mobile careers, their vulnerability increases as their connection to local community, solidarity, and union ties is eroded (Leach and Yates 2015).

Such observations complicate binaries between mobility and immobility, empowerment and disempowerment. While unemployed people have traditionally been portrayed as *suffering from*

immobility (Bradbury, Garde, and Vipond 1986), in the sense that they have limited capacity or resources to move, more recent research suggests that immobility can also be an active process of worker adaptation and resistance in the face of changing labour conditions (Preece 2017). Further, numerous scholars have highlighted the centrality of mobility – albeit mobility on a local scale – to even seemingly ‘static’ lives and professions (Ferguson 2008, Hislop 2016). It is also important to recognise that mobility can be used as a technology to discipline and control citizens – and, indeed, non-citizens (Moran, Gill, and Conlon 2013) – to achieve government ends. The early mobilities scholarship spoke little of ‘the involuntary, obligatory or coerced nature of [some] mobility’ (Moran 2016, 73). Yet as Hall and Smith (2013) argue, a sophisticated politics of mobility must not only document and theorise inequalities in access to movement, but also consider what it means to be ‘forbidden to move – or, for that matter, forced into motion’ (275). Accordingly, recent work emphasises that mobility is regularly withheld from, or forced on, the less powerful members of our societies. This has been observed by mobility scholars in work regarding groups as seemingly disparate as refugees and asylum seekers (Gill 2013), prisoners (Moran, Piacentini, and Pallot 2011), and homeless people (Cloke, Milbourne, and Widdowfield 2003; Roy 2016). This interest in power is evident in discussions of job-seeker activation, although its connection to mobility is yet to receive considered attention.

Recent welfare reforms have introduced mobility as a governing tool to manage unemployed individuals as citizens who need activation. Dean (1995) argues that income support in Australia has always been a governmental-ethical practice with a hybrid nature:

On the one hand, they are called upon to fulfil various politico-administrative goals and ideals including those of income redistribution, alleviation of poverty and disadvantage, equity, efficiency and social justice; on the other, they involve practices of self-formation, practices concerned to shape the attributes, capacities, orientations and moral conduct of individuals, and to define their rights, obligations and statuses. (Dean 1995, 567)

Dean (1995) views social security as a moral governmental practice concerned with ‘the formation and reformation of the capacities and attributes of the self’. Individuals are governed in such a way that they learn to shape their desires, aspirations, attitudes and capacities in order to enhance their own employment prospects. Such self-shaping practices are not just political or governmental practices, but ethical practices of self-cultivation. These measures make moral claims that support the legitimacy of an ‘active society’ and the right to publicly shame those who are unable to demonstrate ‘job readiness’.

Dean’s analysis centres primarily on the activity-test in which job-seekers must participate, which not only includes job-search, but also professional training and skills upgrade activities. What has been rarely mentioned is that physical mobility has now become an intrinsic part of the ‘work readiness’ package. Individual mobility is often enforced to ensure welfare recipients’ compliance (Ludwig-Mayerhofer and Behrend 2015). It also becomes an evaluation item used by public employment service staff to judge individual characters and their motivations to seek paid work. In an implicit way, mobility becomes entwined with welfare conditionality, as it comes to signal a specific condition for welfare eligibility.

Research methods

The article draws on data from a three-year Australian Research Council Linkage project that investigated the formal and informal networks of unemployed individuals, and the impact of those networks on employment status and well-being. The bulk of fieldwork was carried out in 2015–2017, including policy and discourse analysis, national and cohort-specific quantitative surveys, interviews with employment service agency executives, and interviews with individuals receiving unemployment benefits and employment assistance. This article reports findings from one of these datasets – semi-structured interviews with 80 unemployed people in two Australian states, New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (QLD). The QLD sample was drawn from regional

centres along the east coast (Sunshine Coast, Hervey Bay, Rockhampton and Townsville), while the NSW sample was drawn mainly from the greater metropolitan area of Sydney. Research participants were recruited through a network of local employment service agencies, who distributed information about the study to their clients.

The sample included approximately equal numbers of male ($n = 38$) and female ($n = 36$) job-seekers, half of whom were below the age of 35. About 65% of participants had completed year 12 or equivalent, which compares to about 80% in the general population (ABS 2017). Twenty-six percent of the sample had completed one form of post-school qualification, which compares with about 66% in the general population (ABS 2017). Over 60% of the sample had been unemployed for less than two years. All were receiving unemployment benefits and actively looking for work.

With the participants' consent, interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. These transcriptions were then coded inductively using qualitative data analysis software NVivo, and checked for accuracy by three of the researchers. Principles of node saturation were used to ascertain the most prominent themes in the dataset. Among these themes was that of mobility and immobility – the contours and implications of which are presented here.

In our analysis, we consider the lived experiences of unemployment-related mobility and immobility against the backdrop of the previously discussed political discourses that stigmatise unemployed people as 'job snobs'. In doing so, we provide an important counternarrative to the dominant rhetoric – showing that what is lacking from the interviewees' lives is not personal motivation and preparedness to move, but structural and social support to do so. We also show that the unemployed are subject to punitive forms of mobility – not only being pressured to relocate for work but also being required to engage in constant local-level movements in order to receive and maintain their welfare benefits.

Mobility decision-making: moving for job security and stability

The significant majority of respondents in the study showed a strong willingness to move for work on the condition that they were relocating for a permanent job with good career prospects and access to affordable and secure housing. Doug, a man in his fifties with less than Year 10 education, had been unemployed for less than a year and was doing temporary jobs in an ad-hoc way. He said 'I'd move for the right package and the right job, absolutely. I am not unrealistic. If there's something there that lights my fire and I can get my teeth into I would move. I'd move interstate; again, depending on the package and the job and what it entailed.' Another recently unemployed respondent, Sal, a man in his early twenties with a TAFE qualification, was also certain that he would be willing to move for a job. Sal said: 'Definitely, definitely I would be definitely keen to move away, yeah. I've had to do it before and then the family eventually moved down here and I could live back at home again. But yeah definitely I would move or relocate for work.' But his eager willingness was not without qualification. He would be willing to move for a full-time job, 'something solid, yeah, ongoing work.' He would be less likely to consider moving a couple-of-hundred kilometres away 'if it was 10 hours a week or something.'

This view was echoed by Jane, who was also in her early twenties and held a TAFE qualification. After nearly two years of unemployment, Jane felt that she would be 'happy to pack up and move. I know it hurts a lot of the people I am close to, but I told my family now that if I get a job somewhere down south or across the country, I was like, I am going to move. I was like, I can't say no to a full-time job that's going to give me security and everything I want.' Again, full-time work and job security were key factors in her decision-making. 'Contract [work] would be alright if it was long enough. If it was a short-term contract I probably wouldn't take it, just because moving away for even eight months was a huge thing for me. I feel like if it was something just so short term that it wasn't really worth the move. I think I'd probably be a little bit annoyed at packing up so much of my life and going.' Also in his early twenties and TAFE-qualified yet unemployed for over two years, Tom stressed the importance of future stability in his decisions about whether to relocate: 'Stable,

as in somewhere to live that's stable. That's the hardest. You move away and get work, but you have to have somewhere to live. It's hard to rent a house with no rental history, no job. Even if you say to them I've got a guaranteed job. It's pretty hard.'

Most of the interviewees expressed a strong willingness to move for work under the right circumstances, and their considerations should not be dismissed as 'fussiness' or 'lack of motivation'. There is increasing evidence that shows individuals have a strong motivation to secure a decent job (Workman 2017), and young people's willingness to move supports this picture – refuting the myth that the unemployed want to remain on income support payments (Bennett and Forgiione 2015; Knaus 2017; Bennett 2016).

Participants in our study did not rush into a decision about moving for any job offer that came their way. Their careful thinking about what would happen after the move indicated high levels of reflexivity and pragmatism. The respondents were cautious about moving for a short term, temporary job that could not offer stability or career progress. Max, a man in his twenties with Year12 education who had been unemployed for less than a year, explained:

It's got to progress me, it's got to make me better. It's very complicated because I could have family in that area. It's a really hard situation because I have family where I live, so it's the question of do I love my job more or my family, you won't get the support where you go, not where you go out, just where you're working. You're used to that area.

Hitting 'the Harvest Trail' or taking up casual jobs such as being a fruit picker was seen as little more than a temporary fix. Tom explained that the government and employment officers were trying to 'push everybody into these entry-level jobs around here, but they only ever lasted six to eight months.' He described it as 'a big circle', because when the short and casual contract ran out, 'people come back and do the thing again.' The young job-seekers in this study thus resisted these temporary jobs for their lack of security (Woodman and Wyn 2015). Young people were fully aware that when the short contracts were over they would be back where they started. A geographical move would likely make them poorer and no more hopeful as they spent their limited resources on a step that would not help them stay off welfare in the longer term.

Limited mobility options

Despite a strong willingness to move for sustainable and suitable job opportunities, the unemployed individuals in this study faced a range of challenges that constrain their mobility. Some of the most common reasons why interviewees were reluctant to move were family related. A high proportion of the sample were single parents which meant they had high care responsibilities. Some of the family related reasons given included children's schooling needs, their ageing parents' care needs, their partner's work, and their family's housing. For others, their low income simply meant they did not have the capacity to save, so even if they wanted to move they did not have the financial capital to do so. Kade, a man in his late fifties, with a diploma, unemployed for less than a year, stated:

I spoke to my consultant in here who looks after me and I said, look, can I move to somewhere in the country where it's cheaper to rent and all that sort of thing? He said the unemployment rates are higher, so they encourage people to move away from those areas to the city. So there's more job opportunities, but the rent and everything is more expensive. So what do you do? I've got a family. I need to live.

Relocation costs were a major concern for many interviewees. Ronnie, a TAFE-qualified and casually employed woman in her early twenties who supplemented her low income with youth allowance, stressed that 'it's the cost of getting there' that made moving more difficult. The relationship between labour markets and housing markets determines the level of relocation risk and reward. When both housing and employment are insecure it is not difficult to see why moving is seen as too risky. Under these circumstances not moving is an entirely rational response to economic insecurity. Social networks and relationships in familiar places enable social support. People are

wary of having to be 'self-reliant' in a new place with few resources. Ronnie explained that she felt reluctant to move from the smaller regional town where she stayed with her parents to a bigger city with a larger job market: 'it would be easier to work down here, but then [I would] have to fend for myself'.

Apart from the costs of moving and the potential lack of social support, there are a range of other barriers that unemployed individuals face which limit their mobility options. Some of the most commonly discussed barriers included limited access to private transportation, living arrangements, and few labour market opportunities. Many of the young job-seekers told us that their mobility options were constrained by their limited access to a car or driver's licence. When we met Tom in a regional QLD town he was saving to buy his own car. He had obtained a learner's license a few years earlier but had not had any driving lessons since then due to financial pressures. His family could give him a lift if they had time, but Tom could not move freely and independently, and had to rely on his family's goodwill and availability. Things were particularly difficult when he worked as a part-time kitchenhand in a restaurant, as his shift would usually end around 10 o'clock at night. Buses and other forms of public transportation were infrequent, and services had often stopped by the time he got off work. Working close to home was already a challenge without his own vehicle, and Tom could not imagine how he would survive if he had moved away for work.

Facing similar constraints was Josh, a man in his early twenties with a Year 12 education and was unemployed for nearly two years. He had had a learner's license for years but there was no time and no means for him to fulfil the hour requirement to qualify for a provisional driver's license. Josh said: 'I've only done five hours' worth of driving because my parents' car wasn't insured. I only drove it for five hours, like three days.' Like Tom and Josh, many job-seekers have limited physical mobility because they do not own a private car, or do not have a valid driver's license. This is especially the case among young people who are in their late teens or early twenties. Many do not have the funds to hire an accredited driving instructor and have to rely on family members and friends to fulfil the driving hour requirement. This means that many cannot move freely for job interviews or work, especially if they live in regional areas where public transportation services are not sufficient.

Apart from transportation, living arrangements can be an important factor in mobility decision-making. Most of the unemployed young people in our research were living with their family members because the cost of renting was too high. Sammi, a young woman in her early twenties with a diploma qualification, unemployed for less than a year, was living with her sister. Moving to a different city for work or study would only be a possibility for Sammi if she could find cheap accommodation or could stay at a friends' place to save cost. In a similar situation was Jane, a young woman living with her parents in a small town close to the Sunshine Coast in Queensland as she looked for work. Jane had hoped to move out of her parents' house but 'funds just weren't there, especially because I bought myself a car.' She realised that getting a car was 'far more important than moving out.' A car allowed Jane to travel further for work and study, but it also meant that she could not afford more expensive living arrangements in a different location.

Interviewees also frequently mentioned that there were very few jobs available despite the fact that many had been updating their skills and knowledge by obtaining various certificates and post-school qualifications as advised by their employment agencies. Jane, for example, had completed a certificate III in beauty therapy at TAFE at the advice of her employment consultant. She was told that this certificate would demonstrate her 'activeness', and that new knowledge and skills learned in the course would increase her employment prospects. But a few months after obtaining the certificate, she still found it hard to find a stable job:

On the Sunshine Coast you are in the worst position for jobs, because everyone thinks it's huge but it's really not. In terms of jobs, you can't find them anymore because they are just going away technically, and the moment you get older it's like no, no, you are too old because you are too expensive.

Another Queenslander, Tom, explained that many local businesses didn't last very long, and the local job market could not offer secure employment. He commented that 'local businesses like with cafes and stuff like that, like the kebab shops, not a lot of businesses last very long around here because it's cheaper [for people] to go to Domino's or go to Woolies or Aldi [grocery store chains] to get something.' The limited labour market opportunities in their local towns and in larger cities point to the more complex structural issues of unemployment that are beyond the capacity of any individual to effectively manage. When there are no jobs to move to, unemployed individuals have few options but to wait in place.

These findings add to previous mobilities research by highlighting inequalities in mobility patterns. As Elliott and Urry explains, 'variations in the capacity to move are structured by gender, ethnicity, age, dis/ability and social class' (2011, 47). Working mothers, for example, are significantly less likely to be mobile than working fathers, whose partners typically take responsibility for care and household duties (Schneider and Limmer 2008). Economic hardship also drives much mobility (Leach and Yates 2015), and there are complex connections between poverty and race.

Our findings add to this picture of inequality, showing how limited access to financial resources makes relocation a risky activity for many less affluent unemployed workers. While people living on a low income may possess a desire to move, they often lack the structural support to do so. These findings also show that other resources – including social networks and the material support they provide – take on added value in situations of financial precarity. Interviewees did not make decisions about whether to move lightly, but demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of what mobility scholars have shown to be the pitfalls and vulnerabilities that mobility can bring, including previously discussed risks of social isolation (Favell 2008, Leach and Yates 2015) and prolonged economic disadvantage (Fackler and Rippe 2017).

Enforcing mobility: activation and welfare conditionality

For many job-seekers, waiting is not a motionless process. Although many face a range of limitations that restrict their mobility decision-making and geography, they are also prohibited from standing still. They have to demonstrate that they are not 'idling' or 'wasting' public resources by travelling regularly between their residences, the Centrelink offices, and various employment agencies as proof of their activeness. This forced movement indicates a strong push by government agencies that demand that unemployed individuals 'do' something, even if it is just going to an office and sitting down again to apply for jobs online. Doug said that he was asked to visit the Centrelink office twice a week in order to receive his Newstart payment. He believed that visiting the office once a week was more than enough, but he did what was required 'to tick boxes' to ensure he wouldn't lose his benefits. The second visit of the week was primarily about carrying out job searches on the computer provided by the employment agency. Doug thought it was a waste of time: 'I can spend better time trying to get out talking to people [potential employers].'

Sammi shared a similar experience of being required to visit her employment agency twice a week while she was on benefits. Sammi did not own a car, and had to rely on public transportation to make these visits. She explained: 'It can get annoying, especially because public transport is expensive and I can't always afford it.' Further, these frequent visits did little to generate value: 'One of the appointments a week is just sitting on a computer looking for jobs. I am like, I can do that from home, and you can monitor it still. I can sit at home and not spend money. I don't have to get here and then [use a computer], it's annoying. But you do what you've got to do I guess.' In our research, we met a young QLD job-seeker Sal, who had suffered an injury in a previous employment as an auto dismantler. When he was still undergoing therapy and treatment, Centrelink informed him that he was not seen as 'active enough' and needed to do more than 8 hours of job search each week to meet his mutual obligation requirements. With few other options, Sal decided to perform more drop-in job searches, physically travelling to and moving around local industrial areas despite his ongoing injury. The reason for Sal's decision was simple:

I've tried hundreds and hundreds of jobs online and it is a lot better to go see people face-to-face. That's what I sort of try to aim – go pick on [industrial areas] where there's a lot of businesses around. I can go in and introduce myself and ask if they are looking for anyone or looking to hire anyone. Then I try to have a bit of a chat with the boss and then tried to leave my resume there.

Sal did own a car, but he lost his license, and it was too expensive to renew his car registration. With an unregistered car and without a valid license, Sal had to either hitch a ride or take public transport when he visited industrial areas, which were often located in harder to reach parts of the city. It was a time-consuming exercise and his efforts yielded few results. Sal managed to remain positive: 'Yeah, I haven't had much luck with that lately either. Just got to keep on trying, keep a positive outlook about it.' But the fact remained that frequent travelling would further diminish the limited means and resources he had, leaving him in poorer health and worsened living conditions.

If the individual fails to fulfil travel requirements, such 'failure' is read as a violation of 'mutual obligation' policy settings. Individual circumstances and reasons for such 'failures' are often ignored and harsh penalties ensue. Josh said that 'It's just a bit hard when I don't have the transport to get there [to the employment office]. I've got to walk or ride.' He was living out of town and 'our car was on the blink so sometimes it was hard for me to get into town'. As a result, he missed a few appointments with Centrelink. His physical absence was taken as a sign of non-cooperation. Josh's Centrelink payments were consequently suspended for 16 weeks, which led to further indebtedness and poverty. It became a vicious circle – the suspension of payments led to worsened immobility, which effectively diminished Josh's already limited ability to look for work. Josh had to spend a large part of his tight budget on bus fares to Centrelink offices instead of spending it on other essential items. Activation measures that insist on multiple forced movements exacerbate what Hirsch (2013) has described as the 'poverty premium', whereby people on low-incomes typically pay more for utilities, bills, transport and essential goods.

These stories of job-seekers being forced into futile practices of mobility add to the existing research regarding disciplinary mobility in welfare contexts. Scholars such as Roy (2016), Smith and Hall (2016) and Ferguson (2008) have observed that welfare professionals often seek out and travel to the people they support. Ferguson has also noted, however, that such mobility can have disciplinary dimensions. Home visits by social workers, for example, can involve a form of surveillance, and transform the body of the practitioner to a 'conduit through which the rules, regulations and cultural norms of practice passed' (Ferguson 2008, 567). In our study, we see the poor and disadvantaged again being disciplined through technologies of mobility and surveillance, but it is they – rather than welfare professionals – who are made to move. Unemployed workers find themselves in the paradoxical position of having limited access to mobility (in terms of relocations), while being denied any stillness at the micro-level of daily life. Spatial mobility *and* immobility become luxuries of the economically privileged as job-seekers are forced into constant and coerced localised movement.

Conclusion

In his 2010 article on this politics of mobility, Creswell argued that mobilities research should have a threefold focus: 'the fact of physical movement – getting from one place to another; the representations of movement that give it shared meaning; and, finally, the experienced and embodied practice of movement' (Cresswell 2010, 19). Researchers working outside the mobilities paradigm, he observed,

have not been so good at telling us about the representations and meanings of mobility either at the individual level or at a societal level. Neither have they told us how mobility is actually embodied and practised. Real bodies moving have never been at the top of the agenda in transport studies. Understanding mobility holistically means paying attention to all three of these aspects. (Cresswell 2010, 19)

Working within this mobilities framework, this article has presented findings regarding an understudied group of non-elite workers (Cresswell, Dorow, and Roseman 2016, 1790) – unemployed welfare recipients engaged in the work of job search. We have highlighted serious discrepancies between populist portrayals of immobile ‘job snobs’ and the experience and perceptions of individuals that these discourses claim to represent.

In the contemporary policy context in Australia and other liberal welfare states, dominant discourses regarding job-seeker activation tell a pointed story about who job-seekers are and in what circumstances they ‘deserve’ to receive public funds. Individuals on income support are under significant governmental and public pressure to demonstrate their ‘activity’, and are pushed into multiple forms of mobility – both at the macro level when they are encouraged to relocate in search of paid work, and at the micro level when their day-to-day movements are structured around strict reporting and compliance requirements. A pervasive policy logic promotes job search for any job while penalising ‘welfare dependency’ and its associated geographical immobility. Mobility has become morally synonymous with deservedness.

Yet as mobilities scholars have long attested, access to mobility is not distributed equally throughout society. A sensitivity to the politics of mobility (Cresswell 2010) demonstrates that inequalities exist, often coinciding with and compounding other layers of disadvantage, including those associated with gender, ethnicity, age, dis/ability and class (Elliott and Urry 2010). We therefore see that Australian job-seekers are often theoretically open to the possibility of relocating, but that structural barriers make this untenable in many instances – they have neither the funds to enable a geographical move nor the social capital and economic security to thrive in a new place without established local support networks.

These findings are important, not least because they illuminate the mobility decision-making practices of a group of people that find themselves in a contradictory and disempowering situation: on the one hand, they are pushed to move in pursuit of paid work, and their moral value is seen as conditional upon this mobility; on the other hand, their lack of resources makes relocation risky, if not impossible. This article has shown that job-seekers possess a sophisticated understanding of the empirical realities of work-related mobilities, acknowledging that there may be new opportunities associated with a move, while also recognising that a relocation can be an isolating experience, and not in an individual’s best interests (Favell 2008, Leach and Yates 2015; Fackler and Rippe 2017).

While this article has shown that job-seekers’ mobility-related choices often reflect social and economic inequalities – such that the poor and marginalised are less able to move than the socially and economically privileged – it by no means suggests a simple association between mobility and power. Indeed, our research has continued the work of dismantling such orthodoxies, showing that while structural factors mean many job-seekers have limited capacity to relocate, most also find themselves forced into draconian forms of compliance-related movement at the level of day-to-day life. Disciplinary forms of mobility are forced on the unemployed. Such movements are costly in material terms, and in the minds of unemployed individuals they often appear futile. Many job-seekers still diligently fulfil job search and reporting obligations in the belief that ‘you do what you’ve got to do’ and you ‘just got to keep on trying’. These mottos show how self-activation has become part and parcel of job-seekers’ self-identity and practice as welfare conditionality shapes the governmental-ethical understanding of how one should live as a moral citizen.

The conditions of the present, particularly eroded access to entry-level employment and economic security, require more recognition of the complex governmental dynamics inherent in mobility decision-making. Social and geographical mobility in dominant political and policy discourse is constructed as the result of individual effort reinforced by a disciplinary apparatus and strong paternalism. A richer understanding of mobility and agency in social policy, as well as a broader conception of individual well-being, would recognise that in some cases the right thing to do is to stay put and stay connected. The alternative is to find oneself in a state of ‘cruel

optimism' (Berlant 2011), which in this context means being prodded into pursuing the promise of income, rights and belonging associated with paid employment – a status that has become an illusory fantasy of the 'good life' for many in the community.

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